

## Antiracism as War

RUTH BENEDICT LED A CHARGE on the race front. In 1943, she and her colleague Gene Weltfish, with whom she shared a mentor in Franz Boas, declared in an illustrated pamphlet, *The Races of Mankind*, that Uncle Sam needed them. The government turned to scientists when it needed new fuels, substitutes for rubber, and lighter metals, the Columbia anthropologists observed, and “we need the scientist just as much on the race front.”<sup>1</sup> The Public Affairs Committee, which published the pamphlet, convinced the army to assign it to officers as “background material to help counteract the Nazi theory of a super-race.”<sup>2</sup> *Time* hailed it as an intellectual shield “designed to fit a serviceman’s pocket and to fight Nazi racial doctrines.”<sup>3</sup> The pamphlet distilled the lessons of Benedict’s 1940 book *Race: Science and Politics*, in which she had introduced the modern use of the term *racism* as “an unproved assumption of biological and perpetual superiority of one group over another.”<sup>4</sup> She wrote the book, she said then, as a “citizen scientist,” witnessing from afar the rise of the Third Reich.<sup>5</sup> She and Weltfish announced *The Races of Mankind* as something more ambitious: a first shot in a war on racism.

The United States could not win the war, could not defeat the Axis, if it did not, the anthropologists argued, defeat racism, including, above all, racism among Americans. Looking ahead to the formation of the United Nations, Benedict and Weltfish called on the United States to “clean its own house.” It had to reassure the nations of Africa and Asia that “victory in this war will be in the name, not of one race or another, but of the universal Human Race.”<sup>6</sup> The government needed a different kind of scientific offensive, and the Boasians, the intellectual circle that formed around the German American anthropologist, volunteered their services.

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ABSTRACT Racial liberalism, which dominated racial thought from the onset of the Second World War to the *Brown v. Board* decision, inherited from that war an enduring figurative frame: racism as world-historical event, the struggle against it a war. That frame, which liberal anthropologists introduced, undercut nonstatist and radical antiracisms (states wage war), militated against enduring change (wars shouldn’t last forever), and contradicted the anthropologists’ own theories of human difference. Though often described as a hard turn from race as hierarchical biological difference to race as normative cultural difference, World War II marked not a transition from a hard-edged scientific racism to a more subtle cultural racism but the moment at which anthropologists biologized culture—not a racial break but a racial bridge. REPRESENTATIONS 156. 2021 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 85–114. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2021.156.4.85>.

Benedict and Weltfish encouraged readers to see social science as an instrument of war and denazification, but they did not, as some now remember the Boasian school, abandon the science of race. Borrowing from their mentor, who had died that winter, Benedict and Weltfish sorted humans into three broad racial categories but insisted that differences in skin color and hair texture did not determine culture. “One race is not ‘born’ equipped to build skyscrapers and put plumbing in their houses and another to run up flimsy shelters and carry their water from the river,” they wrote. “All these things are ‘learned behavior.’”<sup>7</sup> The anthropologists defined race as a biological fact—with their Caucasoid, Negroid, and Mongoloid races constituting distinct human “stocks”—but warned against ideologies that assumed a stable relation between bodies and hierarchies of intelligence and achievement.<sup>8</sup> Benedict had given that belief the name, new then, *racism*.

Though a hit in liberal circles, *The Races of Mankind* incited a backlash in Washington. The head of the United Service Organizations, declaring the ten-cent pamphlet “controversial,” refused to allow it in USO reading rooms.<sup>9</sup> Congressman Andrew May of Kentucky, the chairman of the Military Affairs Committee, threatening to “expose the motive behind” the pamphlet, blocked the army from distributing it.<sup>10</sup> (The congressman, a Democrat, didn’t like that it showed that Black northerners had scored higher on intelligence tests than white southerners.) Others came to the authors’ defense. Harold Sloan, the economist and executive director of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, condemned May and the Military Affairs Committee for withholding “from our armed forces the simple facts of science that completely refute the enemy’s contention of a superrace.”<sup>11</sup> Constance Warren, the president of Sarah Lawrence College, asked in a letter to the *New York Times*, “Are we going to let Representative May and his colleagues keep our men who are fighting for democracy in ignorance of the fact that modern research proves Jefferson right when he said ‘All men are created equal?’”<sup>12</sup> The debate over the pamphlet set racial conservatives against a rising contingent of racial liberals, who embraced the language of wartime nationalism to imagine antiracism as a grand American tradition, a tradition dating back, they claimed, to the slaveholding founding fathers.

The liberals won. Close to a million Americans read *The Races of Mankind*. The Public Affairs Committee had it translated into seven languages. Hundreds of school districts taught it. The suburban Detroit Cranbrook Institute of Science modeled an exhibit after it that later traveled to cities throughout the United States.<sup>13</sup>

The pamphlet foreshadowed the success of Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal’s then-forthcoming *An American Dilemma*, which it advertised in a “further reading” section. *An American Dilemma* established the tenets of

a new racial liberalism, most of which Benedict and Weltfish had articulated in a more concentrated form in *The Races of Mankind*: racial bias caused discrimination and could be remedied with education and integration; segregation and other forms of racism violated the founding ideals of the United States and damaged the government's interests in decolonizing Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Historians regard *An American Dilemma* as the unofficial charter of racial liberal thought that arose after World War II and culminated in the Warren court's 1954 ruling that segregation in schools violated the Constitution.<sup>14</sup> A generation of white liberal officials read it and consulted it for guidance on how to answer a growing civil rights movement, and scholars have looked to it ever since in constructing genealogies of Cold War liberal antiracism. But wartime shortages limited the book's initial run, and the length and cost (fifteen hundred pages, including ten appendices and almost three hundred pages of notes; \$7.50 for two volumes) deterred casual readers, making it a significant text among liberal elites but reaching a narrower audience than some histories suggest. Selling for a dime, *The Races of Mankind* reached ten times more readers than *An American Dilemma*, without counting the film, children's book, and traveling exhibit versions, and it brings some more subtle, often overlooked dimensions of the big book of racial liberalism to the surface.

The Swede and his team of American social scientists also, echoing Benedict and Weltfish, who themselves contributed literature reviews to the massive investigation, wrote *An American Dilemma* with World War II on their minds, describing antiracism as a war, a war that the United States would, in the course of time, win. "The Negro problem in America represents a moral lag in the development of the nation," Myrdal wrote in the introduction.<sup>15</sup> The nation's better angels would, he reassured his American readers, deliver it to a moral future. He agreed with Benedict that the United States had two wars to fight: the first against Hitler, the second against the waning racial doctrine he embodied. The Swede and the American encouraged their readers to look to the near horizon, to the end of wartime and an analogous racial time.

Benedict did not invent the race front. She borrowed it from a movement. In the first months of the war, with Black soldiers and marines serving in segregated units and Black defense workers facing discrimination and violence, the editors of the *Pittsburgh Courier* had called for a two-front assault on fascism abroad and racism at home. Others enlisted in the fight, transforming the newspaper's demand into a flash movement, the Double V. Chester Himes, then drafting his first novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, wondered, "To us Negro Americans, is not victory abroad without victory at home a sham, empty, with no meaning, leaving us no more free than before?" The United States had a "greater war" to fight, Himes argued,

a war for “the freedom of all the people of all the world” from colonialism and white racial dominance.<sup>16</sup>

The Roosevelt and Truman administrations would win the first front but leave the greater war uncontested. The white racial liberals who read and taught Benedict and Weltfish’s pamphlet answered the call for material racial change—“for equal participation in government and equal benefit from national resources,” in Himes’s words—with silence.<sup>17</sup> But they did, through *The Races of Mankind* and *An American Dilemma*, embrace the martial rhetoric of the Double V, the idea of antiracism as war. Armed with the new social science of race, liberals waged a war to transform not the life chances of Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color but the feelings of white folks, not social structures but miseducated minds. For the *Courier* and Himes, a war on racism meant challenging the state. For the readers of Benedict and Weltfish, it meant affirming it. For the editors and novelist, it meant an urgent, all-out offensive. For the anthropologists, it meant a discrete event, a short-term crisis.

Scholars argue that the end of World War II marked a sea change in Western racial regimes. Howard Winant identifies it as a “racial break,” when the contradictions of and resistance to colonialism and segregation forced the United States and other Western governments to undertake racial reforms.<sup>18</sup> Jodi Melamed further accentuates the racial break, writing that the end of World War II launched not an age of “racial dualism,” as Winant contends, but a whole new “formally antiracist, liberal-capitalist modernity,” in which the United States cast itself as the arbiter of an official, antiredistributive antiracism.<sup>19</sup> But the racial liberalism that Winant, Melamed, and others associate with the late 1940s and the 1950s took root during World War II and inherited from it an enduring figurative frame: racism as world-historical event, the struggle against it a war.

Liberalism, as David Theo Goldberg, Saidiya Hartman, Lisa Lowe, Charles Mills, and other scholars argue, has never not been a racial liberalism.<sup>20</sup> From Locke to Mill, liberalism had masked the continuous, violent division of the human—into colonies, through enslavement and genocide—with the idea of linear time. Other civilizations, Western thinkers believed, had not advanced as far as theirs and deserved less until they did, under the West’s tutelage, somewhere off in an ever-deferred future. But the liberalism of the 1940s and 1950s, with colonialism in crisis and the Cold War escalating, accelerated that assurance, vowing to end racism in a single generation with some of the same liberal instruments of science and government that had long sustained it. The cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in their field-making *Metaphors We Live By*, argue that “human thought processes are largely metaphorical,” that figurative language, far from mere ornamentation, structures how humans conceive of

and act on their environment.<sup>21</sup> If one culture understands argument as war and another as dance, that will, they suggest, structure differences in how the societies debate. From World War II liberals learned to think of antiracism as war, leading them to route antiracist struggle through the state and to encourage faith in a near-future overcoming. That frame had the effect of undercutting nonstatist and radical antiracisms (states wage war) and militating against enduring change (wars shouldn't last forever).

The ascent of fascist regimes on the continent motivated liberal social scientists to theorize racism. Benedict, Melville Herskovits, Otto Klineberg, Ashley Montagu, and other Boasians took on hierarchical theories of human difference as World War II raged. The war made their research all the more urgent, but it also encouraged them and their readers to conceive of racism as something to defeat, a retrograde social formation that would soon, with state and nation mobilized against it, die out. Although some, including Benedict, advocated broad redistributive change, acknowledging white racial dominance as a material regime, their strategic use of wartime nationalism instilled the idea of racism as a discrete crisis and antiracism as the immediate solution. When social scientists declared a war on racism, they invited their readers to believe that it would end in the near future, in their lifetimes, setting the stage for the eventual rise of two imagined endings: color blindness and multiculturalism. World War II might have fueled the civil rights movement, but it also limited it, binding antiracism to the state and to the narrative arc of war. That association alarmed a young Ralph Ellison, who, in an unpublished 1944 review of *An American Dilemma*, worried that antiracism conceived as state violence would, when no longer directed overseas, land back on Black people's heads—"an instrument of an American tragedy."<sup>22</sup>

The nationalist environment of the world war furnished the writing of Benedict and other liberal social scientists with a confused narrative structure: racism as an unnatural, time-bound event and as a natural, almost inevitable result of human difference. Race science, though receding, didn't vanish overnight but endured long enough to guide a rising liberal antiracism. Anthropologists and sociologists continued to subscribe to a waning racial biologism (Caucasoid, Negroid, Mongoloid) and bind it to an ascendant racial social science (learned behavior, cultural difference). Though often described as a hard turn from race as hierarchical biological difference to race as normative cultural difference, World War II marked not a transition from a hard-edged scientific racism to a more subtle cultural racism but the moment at which anthropologists biologized culture—not a racial break but a racial bridge. Liberal social scientists reformed and sustained the hierarchical race science they thought themselves to be dismantling while declaring a war on racism that invited white fantasies of an

end to racism and sometimes racial consciousness itself—as an obstacle overcome, a right conferred, an enlightenment attained, a cure administered, a fiction dismantled. Liberals won the war but not in the way they thought.

### **The Anthropology of Racism**

On the afternoon of December 29, 1938, three hundred members of the American Anthropological Association, including Benedict and Boas, gathered at the Commodore Hotel in midtown Manhattan to condemn Nazi race science. “Anthropology in many countries is being conscripted and its data distorted and misinterpreted to serve the cause of an unscientific racialism,” the association, which Boas had founded in 1902, declared in a statement. “Anthropology provides no scientific basis for discrimination against any people on the ground of racial inferiority, religious affiliation or linguistic heritage.”<sup>23</sup> The statement made the AAA the first national academic association to denounce fascism, for which it had Boas to thank.

Since founding the association in his forties, three years into his tenure at Columbia, the German émigré had argued, against the rising tide of the eugenics movement, that skin color and hair texture had no bearing on behavior. Humans inherited skin color and learned behavior. Scientists who claimed that race revealed character confused correlation with causation and overlooked the confounding variable of social location or “culture.” In 1925, Boas contributed an article to the *Nation* titled “What Is Race?,” in which he argued, not for the first time, that “the behavior of an individual is determined not by his racial affiliation, but by the character of his ancestry and his cultural environment. We may judge of the mental characteristics of families and individuals, but not of races.”<sup>24</sup> He continued to beat that drum as World War II escalated. “We may not infer how high may be the correlation between bodily build and mental characteristics unless this is determined by an investigation which does not take into consideration position,” he wrote in 1940.<sup>25</sup> Neither Boas nor the association he founded dismissed race science. Anthropologists had not erred in contributing to the formation of modern race science, the AAA maintained in the 1938 statement. Racists had misused their findings. It wanted to correct the record, to clear the association’s name. Boas, the model liberal of his time, condemned scientific racism but not race science, believing, in fact, that the latter could be used to combat the former.<sup>26</sup>

Some who otherwise admired Boas disagreed with his lingering allegiance to race science. Alain Locke first encountered the anthropologist at the 1911 Races Congress in London, where Boas delivered research on

“The Instability of Human Types” that caught the attention of the twenty-five-year-old philosopher, who later delivered a series of lectures at Howard University in which he took the anthropologist’s social constructionism further. Race had “no meaning at all beyond that sense of kind, that sense of kith and ken,” Locke determined. It constituted a “social inheritance” disguised as a “biological or anthropological inheritance.” It could not be written off and should not, he thought, be eradicated (detached from domination, it offered a source of belonging), but it had to be reframed as something handed down from one generation to the next and “projected” onto others, not some innate endowment.<sup>27</sup> Boas sought to distinguish biological race from racial culture. Locke argued that the idea of the former arose from the latter, that dominating societies had invented race science to vindicate their theft of land and lives.<sup>28</sup>

Some in Boas’s inner circle shared Locke’s concern but found that they had to go outside the sciences to voice it. Zora Neale Hurston, a Columbia graduate student in the 1930s and the rare Black scientist among Boas’s otherwise white following, often struggled to meet his demand for biological data. When she secured a contract for her first novel, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, Hurston wrote Benedict from her home in Sanford, Florida, to ask if she might contribute a blurb. She mentioned that she’d love for Boas to blurb the novel as well but, knowing that he found much of her folklore research unscientific and considered her fiction writing a mere distraction, worried that he might “massacre my person.” She asked Benedict if she could send her some “head-measuring instruments” with which she could gather the kind of Black southern cranial data that would get her back in her adviser’s good graces.<sup>29</sup> Hurston wrote three more novels and never finished her PhD.

Boas didn’t hesitate to throw his weight behind Benedict’s first book, the 1934 classic *Patterns of Culture*, in which she reviewed fieldwork on three Indigenous cultures—the Pueblo of New Mexico, the Dobu of Melanesia, and the Kwakiutl of the Pacific Northwest—to argue that all cultures exhibit a kind of internal logic that distinguishes them from others. A culture’s organization does not “evolve” from ancient to modern, Benedict concluded. The outside observer must confront it as it exists in nonhierarchical relation to other cultures. Margaret Mead, her student, colleague, friend, lover, and later executor, described Benedict’s treatment of culture as “personality writ large.”<sup>30</sup> Boas, in an introduction to the first edition, called it “the genius of the culture.”<sup>31</sup>

Benedict argued that the global dissemination of Western culture had allowed the United States and other industrial societies to see their own beliefs and behaviors as universal, the inevitable outcome of human cultural evolution, and to dismiss non-Western cultures as relics of an earlier, less

enlightened time. “This world-wide cultural diffusion has protected us as man had never been protected before from having to take seriously the civilizations of other peoples,” she wrote of the modern West. “It has given our culture a massive universality that we have long ceased to account for historically, and which we read off rather as necessary and inevitable.”<sup>32</sup> Benedict knew that her cultural relativism wouldn’t go over well in some corners. It violated the American faith in social advancement and self-making individualism, suggesting that all cultures defined and limited how individuals encountered the world around them. Some, she acknowledged in the final sentences of that first book, would greet it as a “doctrine of despair.”<sup>33</sup> But Benedict wanted her readers to see it as liberating. If humans didn’t inherit culture and it didn’t evolve in an inevitable direction, then that left it to societies, including her own, to build more humane cultures.

After the AAA condemned Nazi race science, Benedict, at Boas’s urging, devoted a semester-long sabbatical to writing a short volume on what she described as “the ‘ism’ of the modern world.” In *Race: Science and Politics*, she defined racism as a modern invention, not an inevitable source of human division and conflict but a new riff on an old theme: “It is a new way of separating the sheep from the goats.”<sup>34</sup> Benedict believed that race had, in a secular age, succeeded religion as the dominant rationale for divesting others of their land and freedom. Benedict hammered on the distinction between race and racism throughout the book, which she divided into two halves, the first dedicated to race and the second to racism. She didn’t want her readers confusing “the facts of race” with “the claims of racism.”<sup>35</sup>

For all that historians credit Benedict with giving the term *racism* “popular currency” and adding it to the “national vocabulary,” few remember that she coined it not to renounce race science but to distinguish good race science from bad, to defend race science as a science.<sup>36</sup> She forged the scientific foundation of racial liberalism not on the renunciation of biological theories of race but on a biological account of racial culture, in which Caucasoid, Negroid, and Mongoloid “stocks,” “whose anatomical specializations are old and were clearly marked at the dawn of history,” get identified with broad cultural divisions.<sup>37</sup> When liberal social scientists inherited that account of culture as the structure of knowledge to which they contributed, they failed to reckon with it as a biologized cultural turn—not a disavowal but a continuation of studies of “Ulotrichy” hair texture, the “Leptorrhine” nose, and the “Mesocephalic” cranium, all of which Benedict detailed in the “science” section of her book.<sup>38</sup>

Benedict did not declare a war on racism in *Race: Science and Politics*. She wouldn’t call scientists to the race front until 1943 with *The Races of Mankind*. But she did frame her argument in nationalist terms. She reasoned, as civil

rights leaders would later argue, that racism hurt the racist as much as it hurt the victim. “In persecuting victims, the Nazis were themselves victimized,” degrading themselves and lowering their own standard of living, she wrote. “Our Founding Fathers believed that a nation could be administered without creating victims. It is for us to prove that they were not mistaken.”<sup>39</sup> Benedict insisted, to her credit, that education and the cultivation of national fellow feeling would not be enough. Racism thrived under social conditions that benefited some and left others without the resources to live. Combating it called for more than antiracist education. It called for redistribution, for which Benedict looked to the state and the American creed that, she believed, guided it.<sup>40</sup>

Other Boasians enlisted in the struggle against fascist race science. Melville Herskovits, reversing his own earlier thought, challenged the idea that Black Americans had no culture of their own, that Black communities in the United States had retained nothing of their African heritage because “Africanisms” could never survive contact with dominant Western cultures. In his 1941 *The Myth of the Negro Past*, Herskovits argued that enslavement had not robbed Black people of their African roots but that enslaved Africans and their descendants had assumed the “outer form” of Western customs while retaining the “inner values” of African cultures.<sup>41</sup> He borrowed his model from Locke, who had argued in the introduction to a 1925 issue of *Survey Graphic*, a first draft of his movement-defining *The New Negro*, that the Black American balanced an “outer life” of “the ideals of American institutions” with an “inner life” constituted of a “deep feeling of race” that formed “the mainspring of Negro life.”<sup>42</sup> Herskovits, then twenty-nine and fresh out of graduate school, had contributed an article to the issue in which he recounted visiting Harlem and, finding “not a trace” of African culture among the neighborhood’s residents, declared Black communities all but identical to and ever more like their white neighbors—“the same pattern, only a different shade!” Locke loathed the article and, when Herskovits refused to revise it, added an editorial note below the title asking, “Does democracy require uniformity?”<sup>43</sup>

In time, Locke, sharing with Herskovits a constant stream of articles and research findings about the distinct contributions of Black culture to the United States, to the West, and to the world, brought him around to his side. But the anthropologist continued to see Black culture—what he conceived as the inner Africanisms of Black life in the United States—as a means to a white national end.<sup>44</sup> The son of immigrants, Herskovits believed that valuing Black Americans’ African heritage would facilitate their integration into a diverse United States: “To give the Negro an appreciation of his past is to endow him with the confidence in his own position in this country and in the world which he must have, and which he can best attain when he has

available a foundation of scientific fact concerning the ancestral cultures of Africa and the survivals of Africanisms in the New World.”<sup>45</sup> He offered white immigrant communities (his own) as a model, believing that their allegiance to ancestral cultures did not obstruct but eased their national integration. Herskovits, who later founded the first African studies program in the United States, believed that a loss of cultural heritage rather than an intractable color line had relegated Black Americans to the bottom of the well.

Ashley Montagu, who studied under Benedict at Columbia, reached the best-seller list in 1942 with *Man's Most Dangerous Myth*, in which he described race as “the tragic myth of our tragic era” and argued that the term should be retired. But Montagu did not, as his title suggests, renounce race science. He identified four human “divisions”: Caucasoid, Negroid, Mongoloid, and, his own addition to the Boasian model, Australoid. (Montagu had written a dissertation about Indigenous Australians.) His four divisions included subdivisions or “ethnicities,” which he classified as social rather than biological formations. “It is alleged that something called ‘race’ is the prime determiner of all the important traits of body and soul, of character and personality,” he wrote. “Such a conception of ‘race’ has no basis in scientific fact.”<sup>46</sup> Montagu conformed to the emerging consensus on race, taking issue not with race science but with the wrong kind of race science (not race but “race”). Benedict, Herskovits, and Montagu wanted to defeat racism, but instead they carried forward and naturalized the categories of a receding racial biologism. Often credited with leading the intellectual transition from “race as science” to “race as social construct,” the Boasians did not instigate a racial break but formed a forgotten bridge. The racial break never broke.

The illustrations to Benedict and Weltfish’s *The Races of Mankind* reveal the biological substructure of the cultural turn in race science. Against their argument that race does not determine culture, the eleven line drawings suture African and Asian bodies to what Western readers imagined as static African and Asian cultural forms. In an illustration of tall and short members of Benedict’s Caucasoid, Negroid, and Mongoloid races, the white figures wear suits while the Africans and Asians wear loincloths. Intended to show that “there are tall ones and short ones in all races,” the illustration instead suggests that the anthropologists’ three human races inhabit three isolated cultures, one of business suits and tall buildings and the others of bare feet and huts.<sup>47</sup> Benedict and Weltfish wanted to denaturalize the relation between race and culture, but the illustrations work against that argument, racializing (and biologizing) culture. The Boasians, as the historian Matthew Jacobson argues, consolidated modern whiteness, drawing together Irish, Italians, Jews, and WASPs with the “full authority of modern

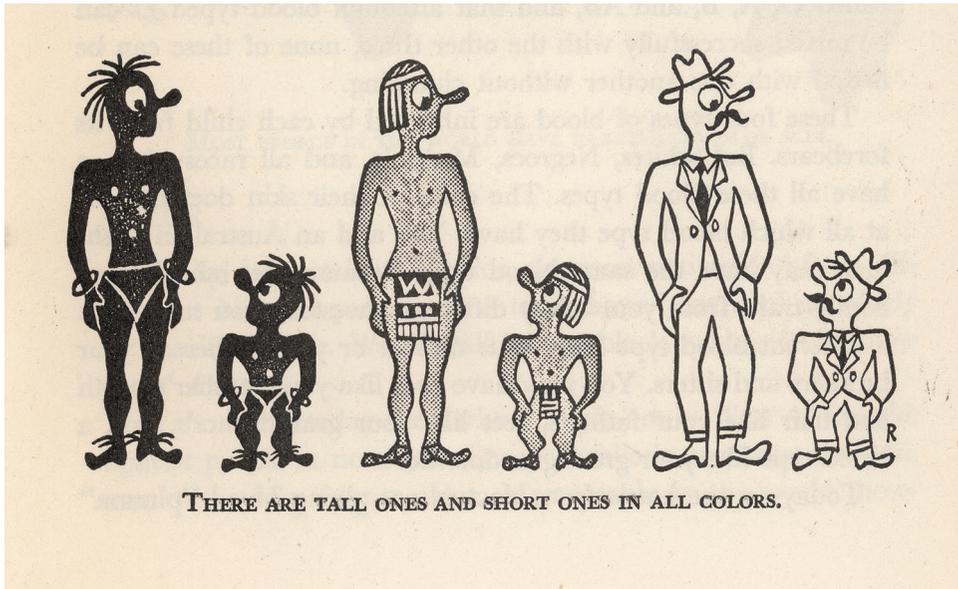


FIGURE 1. Illustration from Ruth Benedict and Gene Weltfish, *The Races of Mankind* (New York, 1943).

science” while differentiating them, in skin color and culture, from Black and Asian communities.<sup>48</sup>

In 1946, the United Auto Workers, seeking to ease racial tensions after desegregating local unions in the South, commissioned an animated film version of *The Races of Mankind*, the ten-minute *Brotherhood of Man*.<sup>49</sup> Benedict and Weltfish then used illustrations from the film to assemble a children’s book, *In Henry’s Backyard*, which they released not long before Benedict’s death, from a heart attack, in 1948. In the film and children’s book, a white man wakes in his bed and looks out the window to discover that the “whole world” has moved into “his own backyard.” Though thrilled at first to find Arab, Asian, Black, and Mexican families in his neighborhood—the Asians wear rice hats, the Mexicans sombreros—he feels an “ugly sort of tug” in the back of his mind: his “Green Devil,” a small green man who lives inside him, a manifestation of his racial bias.<sup>50</sup> The rest of the film and children’s book describe the man’s struggle to rid himself of his Green Devil and embrace his new neighbors. *Brotherhood of Man* and *In Henry’s Backyard*, which reached a much wider audience than Benedict’s academic books or the more celebrated *An American Dilemma*, defined the struggle against racism as a struggle between white men and their wrongheaded feelings, the Green Devils in their minds.



FIGURE 2. Illustration from Ruth Benedict and Gene Weltfish, *In Henry's Backyard* (New York, 1948).

When the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization chose Montagu to lead the writing of a statement on race in 1950, the Boasian model of “race as culture” had achieved dominance among liberal intellectuals and officials. That statement, “The Race Question,” renewed the idea of a war on racism that Benedict and Weltfish had introduced in 1943. Circumstances had called UNESCO to “combat,” Montagu and his coauthors declared. “For, like war, the problem of race which directly affects millions of human lives and causes countless conflicts has its roots ‘in the minds of men.’”<sup>51</sup> The statement, to which social scientists from seven

countries contributed, including the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, showed the Boasians' influence. "The biological fact of race and the myth of 'race' should be distinguished," it asserted.<sup>52</sup> The three human divisions (or four, in Montagu's writing) constituted that "biological fact." The belief that they governed behavior constituted the "myth of 'race.'" Montagu built his argument on a contradiction. He and UNESCO grounded their effort to dismantle racism in the race science that had long facilitated it. The statement did not mark a shift from scientific racism to a more subtle but also insidious cultural racism but from one form of scientific racism to another, now tucked behind a thin veil of culture difference.

But UNESCO's call for antiracist "fighters" to enlist in their "crusade," a crusade that Ruth Benedict launched during World War II, resonated with racial liberals, who had learned to look to the near horizon for the end of racial time.<sup>53</sup> That crusade, that war on racism, consolidated the racial state, securing Washington's standing as the ultimate arbiter of antiracist struggle (the vehicle for waging war), and framed racism as a short-term crisis, militating against lasting structural change. The Boasian war on racism derived moral force from wartime nationalism and a Black movement against American fascism.

### **The War against American Fascism**

The historian John Hope Franklin, teaching at St. Augustine's College, the HBCU in Raleigh, North Carolina, felt on edge. President Roosevelt had signed the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, which mandated that all men between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-six register with their local draft boards, and Franklin, then twenty-five, knew he could be drafted. But his uneasiness didn't stem from the draft. He didn't feel troubled as a draft-age man but as a historian. "I was painfully aware that, going back to the American Revolution, black participation in America's wars had never brought African Americans any meaningful change in their status as second-class citizens," he remembered. "Nothing suggested this war would be any different."<sup>54</sup> After the attack on Pearl Harbor, Franklin organized a committee of teachers at St. Augustine's to inform students about the war and what it could mean for young Black Americans like himself and them. Their commitment would be double, he told them. He and his students would be "fighting not only tyranny abroad but racism at home as well."<sup>55</sup> Their war would have two fronts. With a low draft number and a declaration of war on President Roosevelt's desk, Franklin walked over

to the navy recruitment office to volunteer. He would, he decided, model an ethic of service and sacrifice for his students.

Black leaders shared the young historian's hesitation and willingness to serve. In 1940, the *Crisis*, the official magazine of the NAACP, demanded that the Roosevelt administration desegregate the army, marines, and navy, declaring, "This is no fight merely to wear a uniform. This is a struggle for status, a struggle to take democracy off parchment and give it life."<sup>56</sup> The *Baltimore Afro-American* reminded readers, "We've been fighting our country's wars since 1775, always getting a slap on the back when the fighting begins and a kick in the pants when it's over. One hundred and sixty-five years is a long time, long enough to win a square deal."<sup>57</sup> In 1941, before the United States entered the war, A. Philip Randolph, founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, called for a march on Washington to "demand the right to work and fight for our country" in the defense industries and the armed forces.<sup>58</sup> He believed that his March on Washington Movement could attract ten thousand demonstrators and invited Roosevelt to address them.<sup>59</sup> Black newspapers advertised the MOWM, and Randolph found himself with commitments from a hundred thousand marchers.<sup>60</sup> Fearing a large-scale demonstration at his door, the president issued Executive Order 8802, which established the Fair Employment Practices Commission, and, although it didn't desegregate the armed forces as Randolph had demanded, the labor leader called off the march.

In 1942, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, with a nod to the MOWM, introduced the Double V movement. A twenty-six-year-old man from Wichita, Kansas, asked in a letter to the editors, "Would it be demanding too much to demand full citizenship rights in exchange for the sacrificing of my life?" He thought not, and, countering the government's new V for Victory ads, called for a Double V: "The first V for victory over our enemies from without, the second V for victories over our enemies within. For surely those who perpetuate these ugly prejudices here are seeking to destroy our democratic form of government just as surely as the Axis forces."<sup>61</sup> The young man tied the war against Nazi fascism to the struggle against anti-Black racism in the United States. The *Courier* received a flood of letters endorsing his message and ran some in the next issue under the banner headline "Nation Lauds *Courier's* 'Double V' Campaign." The musicians J. C. Johnson and Andy Razaf collaborated on an official Double V song titled "Yankee Doodle Tan," and for months the newspaper shared images of young men and women flashing the Double V sign and sold Double V merchandise, including window stickers (two cents), service emblems for "OUR boys" (ten cents), and Johnson and Razaf's record (thirty cents).<sup>62</sup>

Other Black newspapers embraced the movement, and some officials, including a few white senators and congressmen, backed it. The Double V

had, as the *Courier* declared that March, seized the nation and introduced the language—antiracism as war—through which Benedict and the Boasians would articulate their own scientific offensive. “The 15,000,000 colored people in this country,” Frank Bolden of the *Courier* wrote, “have proven that they love America because they have given unselfishly of their ‘blood, sweat and tears’ in every national endeavor from the Revolutionary War down to the present World Conflict, even though they were discriminated against by some who did not understand the American creed.”<sup>63</sup> The movement did not raise doubts about the American creed but embodied it, Bolden insisted, as a war on racism, the antithesis of that creed.<sup>64</sup>

Not all Black men embraced the nationalist demand for a Double V. Some resisted the draft, as the historian Robin D. G. Kelley observes, whether in refusing to register—Black men constituted more than a third of nonregistrants—or through more subtle forms of refusal.<sup>65</sup> Malcolm X, knowing that army intelligence officers often hung around his neighborhood, announced to all that would listen that he was “frantic to join . . . the Japanese Army” and arrived at his induction examination “costumed like an actor” in a zoot suit and yellow knob-toed shoes.<sup>66</sup> Dizzy Gillespie told his army interviewers that, if drafted, he might confuse white American soldiers for Germans and shoot them instead. “Well, look, at this time, at this stage in my life here in the United States whose foot has been in my ass? The white man’s foot has been in my ass hole buried up to his knee in my ass hole!” the musician said. “You’re telling me the German is the enemy. At this point, I can never even remember having met a German. So if you put me out there with a gun in my hand and tell me to shoot at the enemy, I’m liable to create a case of ‘mistaken identity.’”<sup>67</sup> X and Gillespie, though no nationalists, agreed with the Double Vers in refusing to risk their lives in the name of freedom overseas when they had never known it in the United States. The small-time racketeer and the musician received 4-F status and walked.

The movement didn’t last long. With the Roosevelt administration refusing to budge on integration and most Black soldiers and marines consigned to labor battalions, the headlines soon changed, growing ever dimmer on the war. The *Courier*, while still advertising Double V merchandise, ran stories of Black soldiers refused service at restaurants in Walla Walla, Washington, and in other northern states, and of a Black sergeant’s death at the hands of white police officers in Little Rock, Arkansas. “The War Department has given Negroes token representation,” the editors wrote, and “placed a preponderance of Negro selectees in quartermaster, engineering and service units.”<sup>68</sup> Randolph also lost faith. In 1944, abandoning the nationalism of the MOWM, he mounted a more radical attack on the Roosevelt administration. “This is not a war for freedom,” he declared. “It is a war between the imperialism of Fascism and Nazism and the imperialism

of monopoly capitalistic democracy. Under neither are the colored peoples free.”<sup>69</sup> Randolph and others no longer believed that the first V aligned with the second. The state had found a new second front, a front not of racial redistribution but of greater, world-consuming racial theft.

James Baldwin felt the change in his Harlem neighborhood. A teenager when the war broke out, he noticed a “strange, bitter shadow” on the faces of the men and women on his block, who gathered in “the strangest combinations”—young with old, Adventists with Methodists, conservatives with radical “race men”—to discuss what they had heard from their sons and brothers in the army. “Racial tensions throughout the country were exacerbated during the early years of the war,” Baldwin recalled, “partly because the labor market brought together hundreds of thousands of ill-prepared people and partly because Negro soldiers, regardless of where they were born, received their military training in the south. What happened in defense plants and army camps had repercussions, naturally, in every Negro ghetto.”<sup>70</sup> In 1942, Baldwin moved to Montgomery, New Jersey, to work in the town’s defense factories and for the first time, having never lived outside of Harlem, found himself denied service at diners and bars. The war brought him into contact with what he believed had killed his Louisiana-born father: “the weight of white people in the world.”<sup>71</sup> A few hours after his father’s funeral, in the summer of 1943, a white NYPD officer shot a Black soldier at the Braddock Hotel, triggering a riot.

The unrealized ambitions of the Double V movement also drove a wedge between the Black left and white labor. White-led trade unions worried that backing the movement could undermine the war effort. The *Daily Worker*, the Communist Party USA newspaper, condemned it, insisting that “the foes of ‘Negro rights’ in the country should be considered as secondary to Axis enemies.”<sup>72</sup> The communist snubbing didn’t sit well with Chester Himes, a fellow traveler who came to see white trade unionists and the CPUSA as obstacles rather than allies in the struggle for Black freedom. He declared his allegiance to the Double V movement, calling, in a National Urban League journal, for the nation to “open a second front for freedom” against “our powerful native fascists.”<sup>73</sup> It didn’t, and near the end of the war, a frustrated Himes asked, “Are we seeking the defeat of our ‘Aryan’ enemies, or the winning of them?” and wondered whether a communist revolution, as Marx and Engels had conceived it, would serve Black America at all.<sup>74</sup> The novelist determined that war had been the wrong figurative language for antiracist struggle not because wartime didn’t end—constituting, in the historian Mary Dudziak’s words, an “enduring condition,” “the only kind of time we have”—but because white leaders committed the nation to wars that served white racial interests.<sup>75</sup> The war on racism that he had once cheered might, he thought, boomerang on him and other Black people.

Himes's 1945 novel *If He Hollers Let Him Go* signaled his disillusionment with the Double V movement and with white trade unionists at the end of the war. The novel follows a Black defense worker in wartime Los Angeles as he goes from newborn nationalist to frustrated doubter of all that white America, right and left, claimed to believe in. "I felt the size of it, the immensity of the production," Bob Jones, the protagonist, remarks of seeing the docks on which he works. He had never "given a damn" about the war, he admits, but now, looking out at the cranes, he got "that filled-up feeling of my country; I felt included in it all; I had never felt included before."<sup>76</sup> The feeling is fleeting. After a white woman refuses to work with him and they exchange insults, Bob receives a demotion. His union steward declines to defend him, suggesting that it could aggravate racial tensions among union members and hurt the war effort: "In order to beat fascism we got to have unity." Bob fires back, "What the hell do I care about unity, or the war either, for that matter, as long as I'm kicked around by every white person who comes along?"<sup>77</sup> Bob and Himes himself had lost the "filled-up feeling" of the Double V, recognizing that war and nationalism didn't serve their interests.

In North Carolina, John Hope Franklin discovered what the novelist had. At the navy recruitment office, he reeled off his credentials, which included a Harvard PhD, for his interviewer, a young white lieutenant. The lieutenant told him that he couldn't offer him a commission because he lacked "one important qualification, and that was color."<sup>78</sup> Undeterred, Franklin wrote to the War Department, where some of his former Harvard classmates, including some who hadn't finished their degrees, had obtained assignments as historians. Although he enclosed a letter of recommendation from the president of the neighboring University of North Carolina, the War Department never wrote back. When the army drafted his brother, a college graduate and a high school principal, and assigned him to the kitchen brigade, where he faced abuse from his white staff sergeant, Franklin decided that he'd had enough and dedicated himself to avoiding the draft. "We pledged ourselves to a 'Double V,'" he later wrote, "and no one more devoutly hoped for success on both fronts than myself. With these twin goals in mind, I was as patriotic as any American. There is, however, a point beyond which even the most patient, long-suffering loyalist will not go."<sup>79</sup> The Roosevelt administration had flouted the demands for a Double V, and Franklin had lost faith in a red, white, and blue war on racism. In the last months of the war, the *Chicago Defender* admitted, "Dixie still prefers Nazis to Negroes."<sup>80</sup> But the Boasians and the War Department embraced the rhetoric of the 1942 movement, declaring their own war on racism, a war that also looked to the state for answers but that fostered a more enduring faith in time.

## The War for the American Creed

The New Deal suffered a debilitating setback in the 1942 midterm elections. After the GOP gained forty-six seats in the House and nine in the Senate, Congress defunded the Farm Security Administration and abolished the Works Progress Administration. The elections revealed cracks in the New Deal coalition, and liberal internationalists turned to wartime nationalism to chart a new consensus course for the United States. In 1943, Vice President Henry Wallace, addressing a labor meeting in Detroit, called for a new internationalism, for a “century of the common man.”<sup>81</sup> That common man’s internationalism could not be achieved unless the United States led, and the United States could not lead, Wallace declared, unless it modeled the values it urged on others. “We cannot fight to crush Nazi brutality abroad and condone race riots at home,” he told the meeting, alluding to that summer’s riots in Detroit and elsewhere. “We cannot plead for equality of opportunity for peoples everywhere and overlook the denial of the right to vote for millions of our own people.”<sup>82</sup>

Wendell Willkie, who had run against the Roosevelt-Wallace ticket in 1940, agreed, scoring a massive bestseller in 1943 with *One World*, in which he chronicled his two-month, thirty-one-thousand-mile world tour, from the Middle East to the Soviet Union to China. Willkie discovered, he wrote, a “gigantic reservoir of good will toward us, the American people.”<sup>83</sup> Iranians, Soviets, and Chinese—all, he said, looked to the United States to deliver on the unrealized ambition of the League of Nations. But first it had to rid itself of “race imperialism” at home. “The attitude of the white citizens of this country toward the Negroes,” Willkie determined, “has undeniably had some of the unlovely characteristics of an alien imperialism—a smug racial superiority, a willingness to exploit an unprotected people.”<sup>84</sup>

Wallace, Willkie, and other liberal internationalists knew that the United States could not make inroads in the decolonizing world if it didn’t address southern segregation, news of which, Willkie noted, had reached Asia and the Middle East and concerned the officials with whom he met there. (Some in Lebanon, for example, asked him how the “maladjustments of race in America” might figure into the state’s “relations with Vichy.”)<sup>85</sup> Black communities had grown frustrated with the government’s hollow assurances, and, after Adam Clayton Powell Jr. won a seat in Congress vowing to “represent the Negro people first” and “after that all the other American people,” white liberals worried that frustration could lead to a militant turn among Black leaders.<sup>86</sup> In 1944, Wallace lost his slot on the Roosevelt ticket to Harry Truman. Willkie died of heart failure that fall at fifty-two. Although they wouldn’t benefit from it themselves, the two men

had drafted the world-facing racial liberalism, an internationalist American creed, that would animate the Cold War state.

Their ideas received the backing of science in Benedict and Weltfish's *The Races of Mankind* and in *An American Dilemma*, which Frederick Keppel, the president of the Carnegie Corporation, had commissioned in 1937, recruiting Gunnar Myrdal to direct "a comprehensive study of the Negro in the United States."<sup>87</sup> Keppel decided to "import" a director, overlooking Black scholars—including W. E. B. Du Bois, then seeking funding for his never-finished "Encyclopedia of the Negro"—because he wanted someone "with a fresh mind, uninfluenced by traditional attitudes or by earlier conclusions." The director must, he said, come from a nation with "high intellectual and scholarly standards but with no background or traditions of imperialism" so that Black readers might trust the findings.<sup>88</sup> He looked to Sweden and settled on the young sociologist then teaching at Stockholm University.

A foreign intellectual's endorsement of an American creed could not have come at a better time. "When the Trustees of the Carnegie Corporation asked for the preparation of this report in 1937, no one (except possibly Adolf Hitler) could have foreseen that it would be made public at a day when the place of the Negro in our American life would be the subject of greatly heightened interest," Keppel wrote in his foreword to the book, "when the eyes of men of all races the world over are turned upon us to see how the people of the most powerful of the United Nations are dealing *at home* with a major problem of race relations."<sup>89</sup> The war had made American anti-Black racism visible to the world, but it also, he believed, offered a solution: a renewed faith in the nation's liberal creed and an emerging conviction, at least among white liberal elites, that racism could be defeated. *An American Dilemma*, though more subtle in how it wielded martial language and biologized categories of cultural difference, carried on the Boasians' war on racism and their faith in a near-future overcoming.

Myrdal embraced his assigned role as an outside observer, introducing himself as "a stranger to the problem" without "all the familiar and conventional moorings of viewpoints and valuations."<sup>90</sup> With a budget of \$250,000, he recruited a star-studded team of American collaborators, including the political scientist Ralph Bunche, the sociologists E. Franklin Frazier and Charles Johnson, the philosopher Locke, and Boas and his former students Benedict, Herskovits, and Montagu, from whom he gathered literature reviews or "memoranda." One historian describes the resulting book as "a battleground in miniature," a distillation of the social scientific struggle to chart the future of Black America, with a white Swede, of all people, setting the rules.<sup>91</sup>

The sociologist didn't sit down to write *An American Dilemma* until March 1941, after returning from a war-torn Scandinavia. He considered it his contribution to the war effort. "I thought about all the youngsters, all my friends in Europe, who were either in prison or killed in war," Myrdal remembered of drafting the book in a borrowed Princeton office. "It became my war work. And I think this meant much for what the book came to be."<sup>92</sup> The war also framed how he thought about race in the United States. "The War is crucial for the future of the Negro, and the Negro problem is crucial in the War," he wrote, imagining the titular American dilemma as an "ever-raging conflict" between national values and national behavior in which the former would, in time, overwhelm the latter.<sup>93</sup> The historian Nikhil Singh argues that *An American Dilemma* established an enduring liberal faith in racial reform as "something that is paradoxically already accomplished and never quite complete."<sup>94</sup> But the book also framed the American dilemma as a war, inviting readers to see racism as a time-limited crisis, an antagonist to be turned back, defeated for good like an army of old men toting Civil War muskets.

*An American Dilemma* located the battle for the national creed not in the halls of Congress, not in courtrooms, neighborhoods, schools, or businesses, but in the minds of white men. "The ordinary white man," Myrdal wrote, subscribed to a moralism and rationalism that constituted "the glory of the nation, its youthful strength, perhaps the salvation of mankind," but that also clashed with the nation's treatment of Black people. That conflict created a "moral struggle" that unfolded not between people but within them, within the otherwise moral minds of white men. "There are no homogeneous 'attitudes,'" he determined, "but a mesh of struggling inclinations, interests, and ideals, some held conscious and some suppressed for long intervals but all active in bending behavior in their direction."<sup>95</sup> The white American mind contained the whole of the dilemma: the racist attitudes that marred the national creed and the moralism and rationalism that would reform them. White men stood as the villains and as the heroes-to-be of the war for the American creed, a creed that, when won, might save the world. "America feels itself to be humanity in miniature," Myrdal wrote in the final pages of *An American Dilemma*. "When in this crucial time the international leadership passes to America, the great reason for hope is that this country has a national experience of uniting racial and cultural diversities and a national theory, if not a consistent practice, of freedom and equality for all."<sup>96</sup> If the conflicted white American mind contained the nation's moral struggle and the nation contained the world, then the future of the world, he suggested, came down to how white Americans confronted that sometimes conflicting mesh of inclinations, interests, and ideals.

*An American Dilemma* shed the outward racial biologism that still lingered at the surface of Benedict's *Race: Science and Politics* and Montagu's *Man's Most Dangerous Myth*. The "Negro race" is "a social and conventional, not a biological concept," Myrdal wrote, citing state and regional differences in the legal definition of race. "In modern biological and ethnological research 'race' as a scientific concept has lost sharpness of meaning, and the term is disappearing in sober writings."<sup>97</sup> Although he continued to distinguish between a Caucasoid and a Negroid race, he insisted that the future of race science would not be biological but sociological, not race as nature but race as social construct. (The Mongoloid race all but disappeared, receiving one mention in an endnote. *An American Dilemma* sketched racial liberalism in Black and white.)

While subscribing to the Boasian claim that cultures could be differentiated but not ranked, Myrdal defined Black culture as "a distorted development, or a pathological condition, of the general American culture." White culture could not be described as better "in an absolute sense," he stressed, before adding that cultural relativism did not "gainsay our assumption that *here, in America*, American culture is 'highest' in the pragmatic sense that adherence to it is practical for any individual or group which is not strong enough to change it."<sup>98</sup> *An American Dilemma* might have discarded some of the biological exterior of the Boasians' research, but it carried forward their biologized theories of racial culture. The Swedish sociologist could define Black and white national cultures as coherent, isolated, nonintersecting entities, lending themselves to hierarchical ordering, because Benedict and her colleagues had made racial biologism the foundation on which they introduced the idea of race as culture. *An American Dilemma*, Myrdal's "war work," his contribution to the race front, blurred the line between a war on white racism and an emerging war on a biologized Black culture.

The liberal scientific war on Black culture found an audience with liberal elites, including some Black liberals, who disseminated the claims of *An American Dilemma*. (Although wartime shortages limited the initial run of the fifteen-hundred-page book, the Carnegie Corporation got it into the hands of some five hundred leaders and intellectuals, including Eleanor Roosevelt. About a hundred thousand readers bought it after the war—a lot but nowhere close to the sales figures for *The Races of Mankind*.)<sup>99</sup> In a commencement address at Fisk University, Ralph Bunche, who had contributed more than a thousand pages of memoranda to *An American Dilemma* (and whom some at the time believed to be the real author), celebrated an American creed "writ large in our Constitution, in our traditions." Bunche urged the graduates to discard their Black identities. "Negroes," he stated, "are better Americans than they are Negroes. They are Negroes primarily in a negative sense—they reject that sort of treatment that deprives them of

their birthright as Americans.” Without the “un-American handicap of race,” he added, “their identification as Negroes in the American society would become meaningless—at least as meaningless as it is to be of English, or French, or German, or Italian ancestry.”<sup>100</sup> Bunche, who would win the 1950 Nobel Peace Prize for negotiating an end to the First Arab-Israeli War, suggested that white racism had inflicted something called “Negro culture” on Black people and advised the Fisk graduates to abandon that culture, to shed their Blackness and embrace a white cultural nationalism. He told the young Black men and women seated before him to wage their own war, not an external war on white racial dominance but an internal war on Blackness. The wars that the Boasians and the Double Vers had declared at the outset of the world war raged on, but, with the war among white Western governments over, the race front had moved, settling back along the color line.

### The War on Blackness

“Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma* is not an easy book for an American Negro to review,” a thirty-year-old Ralph Ellison wrote in 1944. Ellison worried that, for all the book’s merits, it contained “a strong charge of anti-democratic elements” that could be turned against Black people.<sup>101</sup> *An American Dilemma* assumed that Black communities had nothing to offer the larger nation, that they had no distinct culture of their own, other than a damaged form of white culture. Ellison did not consider Blackness “distorted” or “pathological” and did not see much to desire in whiteness—not that white people would ever share that identification with Black people. *An American Dilemma* failed to see that Black culture might offer “counter values” to white national culture, that the United States could not be democratic until it allowed Black people the freedom, he wrote, borrowing a favorite line from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, “to take [their own culture] and create of it ‘the uncreated consciousness of their race.’”<sup>102</sup>

Paul Bixler, an editor at the *Antioch Review*, had solicited Ellison’s review in the fall of 1944, after a chorus of critics, white and Black, had hailed *An American Dilemma* as “a book which nobody who tries to face the Negro problem with any honesty can afford to miss” and “the most penetrating and important book on our contemporary American civilization that has ever been written.”<sup>103</sup> When Ellison mailed him his “rather brash review,” as he later described it, Bixler, finding it “a little too hot” for *Antioch*, killed it.<sup>104</sup> The Germans launched an offensive on the Ardennes that winter, and Ellison, a merchant marine, sailed to France. He didn’t revisit his review until 1964, when he included it in *Shadow and Act* with a few words tacked on to the end: “—Unpublished. Written in 1944 for *The Antioch Review*.” Ellison

later looked back on the review as a moment that marked for him “a break with sociology as a guide to understanding my own life and background of experience.”<sup>105</sup> He didn’t believe that social science had the answers he sought and dedicated himself to seeing if fiction might.

When Ellison sat down to review *An American Dilemma*, he knew that the war wouldn’t last much longer. He didn’t find that reassuring because he didn’t believe that, with the Axis defeated, the United States would wage the war on racism that the Boasians, Himes, and the Double V movement had called for. He worried that it would instead declare war on Black Americans, with liberals leading the charge. “The military phase of the war will not last forever,” Ellison observed. “It is then that [*An American Dilemma*] might be used for less democratic purposes.” He concluded his review with an urgent warning: “This is the cue for liberal intellectuals to get busy to see that *An American Dilemma* does not become an instrument of an American tragedy.”<sup>106</sup> Ellison recognized the ease with which a war on racism could slide into a war on Blackness waged in the name of antiracism. Liberal science had reinforced the color line (Caucasoid, Negroid) while seeming to dismantle it (social construct), licensing white liberals to direct their war-honed martial rhetoric at Black people while shielding themselves with the claim that Blackness didn’t exist at all, other than as a kind of negative reflection of whiteness. Ellison, reading between the lines of *An American Dilemma*, didn’t see much to distinguish the new race science from the old.

The effort to eradicate racist feelings from white minds looked a lot like an effort to eradicate Black culture, now imagined as a manifestation of white racist feelings, from Black communities. “Are American Negroes simply the creation of white men,” Ellison asked, “or have they at least helped to create themselves out of what they found around them? Men have made a way of life in caves and upon cliffs, why cannot Negroes have made a life upon the horns of the white man’s dilemma?” And how, he wondered, could the horns of the white man’s dilemma be the solution to that dilemma? The end of World War II led Ellison to ask what Frederick Douglass had wondered in 1875, at the end of Reconstruction: “If war among the whites brought peace and liberty to the blacks, what will peace among the whites bring?”<sup>107</sup> Ellison had a hunch. The violence that the state had meted out during the war had to go somewhere. The social scientific war on racism consolidated the racial state, routing activism to Washington and encouraging time-limited solutionism, but it also, the aspiring novelist observed, tied liberal antiracism to state violence. Black people tended to be on the receiving end of that violence, and Ellison didn’t see how it would be otherwise after the world war. (The coming wars on drugs and crime would bear out his unpublished warning, the American tragedy he had feared.)

Ellison had struggled with the social science of race since he first encountered it as a student at the Tuskegee Institute in the mid-1930s. He recalled the “humiliation” he felt when a teacher, sharing the wisdom of the Chicago school sociologist Robert Park, described Black people as the “lady of the races” without, Ellison remarked, “even bothering to wash his hands, much less his teeth.” His three years at Tuskegee taught him, he later wrote, that “nothing could go unchallenged, especially that feverish industry dedicated to telling Negroes who and what they are, and which can usually be counted upon to deprive both humanity and culture of their complexity.”<sup>108</sup> In his review of *An American Dilemma*, Ellison didn’t limit his criticism to that “feverish industry” to which it belonged. He also condemned the left and New Dealers for how they “went about solving the Negro problem without defining the nature of the problem beyond its economic and narrowly political aspects.”<sup>109</sup> The left and the Roosevelt administration had failed to account for the vibrant world of Black culture, he thought, while liberal sociologists had failed to account for the material interests that sustained a white national culture.

Ellison, who had begun to distance himself from communism but had not yet cut ties with it—he wouldn’t create the character of Brother Jack for a few more years—identified a gulf between a deracinated economism and a dematerialized scientism. That gulf, he wrote, “where Marx cries out for Freud and Freud for Marx, but where approaching, both grow wary and shout insults lest they actually meet, has taken the form of the Negro problem.”<sup>110</sup> The intellectual momentum had, Ellison realized, swung again, from Marx to Freud, from the old left to the new liberalism. The war had hollowed out the New Deal and nationalized the Black freedom struggle, framing it not as a movement for resources and enfranchisement but as a battle for a more liberal whiteness and a less Black Blackness.

Ellison and Myrdal met in 1967 at an event at the University of Michigan. Ellison, addressing thousands of students at Ann Arbor’s Hill Auditorium, and with the Swedish sociologist looking on, argued that “in treating people as abstractions rather than individuals, sociology has ignored the complexity of human life and gotten us further away from realities.” He worried that *An American Dilemma* and the age of racial liberalism it inaugurated had “created young black Negroes who believe the sociological definitions of themselves” and described a Black thirteen-year-old who, after the Newark rebellion, bemoaned, at least in Ellison’s telling, that “women dominate our families and I’m culturally deprived.”<sup>111</sup> Amid the first stirrings of what some would later describe as a white conservative backlash to Black civil rights, the novelist looked instead to the 1940s, blaming a liberal “frontlash” of officials and jurists and the social scientists who advised them, including the man standing beside him. Myrdal admitted on stage that “sometimes in

failing to grasp the complexity of life, we [sociologists] do gloss over important problems” but defended the sociologist’s role in offering “rational information” on which to build.<sup>112</sup> He then, out of nowhere, condemned anthropologists for disseminating statistics that he found dubious.

Neither man could see how anthropologists—Ruth Benedict, Gene Weltfish, Franz Boas, Melville Herskovits, Ashley Montagu—had formed the biological substructure of the racial liberalism to which *An American Dilemma* had contributed, wedding race science to cultural difference, the Caucasoid and Negroid races to the social construct, wartime to racial time. The literature scholar Kenneth Warren argues that Jim Crow defined Ellison’s career and made it difficult for him to write another novel after *Invisible Man*. Ellison’s artistic moment had, he suggests, vanished around him as antiracist movements brought down that regime, unlocking more immediate avenues for Black struggle than literature and culture.<sup>113</sup> Warren considers most scholars of African American literature bad historicists for failing to see the writing of Ellison’s time as “prospective,” looking ahead not to canonical status but “its own wished-for obsolescence.”<sup>114</sup> (Having, in Warren’s mind, achieved that obsolescence, “African American literature” ceased to exist as more than an instrument with which Black and non-Black elites have maintained their class status and distracted from economic stratification)<sup>115</sup> He sees the end of segregation as a hard historical break, a moment when strategies should have but didn’t change. Others—his bad historicists—see it as a soft break, an instance of one racial regime mutating into another. But we’re all historicists now, and perhaps we shouldn’t be. Perhaps racial liberalism has us stuck in time, measuring the distance between race science and cultural difference, 1941 and 1954, a solution achieved or denied, when we should be wondering what it means that one generation after another has gazed out on the near horizon from an ever-shifting race front, convinced that time would soon come. Perhaps a solution was never the solution.

## Notes

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1. Ruth Benedict and Gene Weltfish, *The Races of Mankind* (New York, 1943), 3.
2. “Army Drops Race Equality Book; Denies May’s Stand Was Reason,” *New York Times*, March 6, 1944.
3. “Race Question,” *Time*, January 31, 1944, 58.
4. Ruth Benedict, *Race: Science and Politics* (New York, 1940), v–vi. The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates the first use of the term *racism* to 1903, but it did not come into wider use until the 1930s with the rise of fascism on the Continent; *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “racism,” [www.oed.com/view/Entry/157097](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/157097). See

- George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton, 2002), 165; and Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas* (New York, 2016), 342.
5. Benedict, *Race*, vii.
  6. Benedict and Weltfish, *Races of Mankind*, 31.
  7. *Ibid.*, 16.
  8. *Ibid.*, 11.
  9. Quoted in “Race Question,” 58.
  10. Quoted in “Army Drops Race Equality Book.”
  11. Quoted in “Plans New Edition of Race Pamphlet: Public Affairs Group Differs with May’s View That Led to Army Circulation Ban,” *New York Times*, March 8, 1944.
  12. Constance Warren, “A Plea for Racial Truth,” *New York Times*, March 10, 1944.
  13. For more on the circulation and different versions of *The Races of Mankind*, see Zoë Burkholder, *Color in the Classroom: How American Schools Taught Race, 1900–1954* (New York, 2011), 74–79; and Tracy Teslow, *Constructing Race: The Science of Bodies and Cultures in American Anthropology* (Cambridge, 2014), 246–82.
  14. See Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis, 2011), 55–62; Naomi Murakawa, *The First Civil Right: How Liberals Built Prison America* (New York, 2014), 40–54; and Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA, 2004), 142–51.
  15. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York, 1944), xix.
  16. Chester Himes, “Now Is the Time! Here Is the Place!,” *Opportunity*, September 1942, 272.
  17. *Ibid.*, 271.
  18. Howard Winant, *The World Is a Ghetto: Race and Democracy since World War II* (New York, 2001), 145.
  19. Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, 4.
  20. For longer histories of a never-not-racialized liberalism, see David Theo Goldberg, *The Racial State* (Malden, MA, 2002), 57–73; Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1997), 115–24; Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC, 2015), 6–7, 39–41; and Charles W. Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism* (New York, 2017), 28–48. Hartman writes that “the universality or unencumbered individuality of liberalism relies on tacit exclusions and norms that preclude substantive equality” (122). Lowe argues that “modern liberalism defined the ‘human’ and universalized its attributes to European man,” with race enduring as the “trace” of violent exclusions from and inclusions within that universal (6). Mills, while theorizing a “radical black liberalism,” contends that “racial liberalism, or white liberalism, is the actual liberalism that has been dominant since modernity” (203, 31).
  21. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago, 1980), 6.
  22. Ralph Ellison, “*An American Dilemma: A Review*,” in *Shadow and Act* (New York, 1964), 317.
  23. “The New York Meeting of the American Anthropological Association,” *Science* 89, no. 2298 (1939): 30.
  24. Franz Boas, “What Is Race?,” *Nation*, January 28, 1925, 91.
  25. Franz Boas, “Race and Character,” in *Race, Language and Culture* (New York, 1940), 195. Boas wrote “Race and Character” in German in 1932, translating it into English for inclusion in the 1940 collection of his writing.

26. For more on Boas's racial thought, see Teslow, *Constructing Race*, 32–73. Scholars celebrate Boas for challenging scientific racism, but most, historian Tracy Teslow argues, fail to reckon with his commitment to refining rather than abolishing race science. “His fight against erroneous ideas, invidious distinctions, faulty logic, and poorly conducted investigations,” she writes, “was married to his persistent efforts to use the methods and theories of physical anthropology and genetics to comprehend variation that he still understood in fundamentally racialized terms” (66). His and his students' bridging of race science and culture made that science integral to a racial liberalism often thought to have ousted it.
27. Alain Locke, “The Theoretical and Scientific Conceptions of Race,” in *Race Contacts and Interracial Relations: Lectures on the Theory and Practice of Race*, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart (Washington, DC, 1992), 11, 12.
28. For more on Locke's engagement with Boas's research at the Races Congress and in his Howard lectures, see Jeffrey C. Stewart, *The New Negro: The Life of Alain Locke* (New York, 2018), 217–18, 265–66.
29. Zora Neale Hurston to Ruth Benedict, December 4, 1933, in *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, ed. Carla Kaplan (New York, 2002), 283, 284.
30. Margaret Mead, preface to *Patterns of Culture*, by Ruth Benedict (Boston, 1959), vii.
31. Franz Boas, introduction to *Patterns of Culture*, by Ruth Benedict (Boston, 1934), xiii.
32. Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (Boston, 1934), 6.
33. *Ibid.*, 278.
34. Benedict, *Race*, 3, 5.
35. *Ibid.*, vi.
36. Fredrickson, *Racism*, 165; Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning*, 342.
37. Benedict, *Race*, 50.
38. *Ibid.*, 40, 41, 43.
39. *Ibid.*, 256.
40. Cultural anthropologist Mark Anderson argues that Benedict's reliance on a white immigrant model of assimilation and her devotion to the nation's founding ideals allowed her to deflect “the question of whether racism was endemic to (white) American culture.” The wartime context informed and limited her writing and the emerging racial liberal consensus to which it contributed; Mark Anderson, *From Boas to Black Power: Racism, Liberalism, and American Anthropology* (Stanford, 2019), 117.
41. Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York, 1941), 298.
42. Alain Locke, “Enter the New Negro,” in “Harlem,” ed. Alain Locke, special issue, *Survey Graphic* 53, no. 11 (1925): 632.
43. Melville J. Herskovits, “The Dilemma of Social Pattern,” in “Harlem,” ed. Alain Locke, special issue, *Survey Graphic* 53, no. 11 (1925): 678, 676.
44. Locke biographer Jeffrey Stewart suggests that the philosopher's influence on Herskovits “laid the groundwork for a revolution in anthropological thinking,” shifting the discipline from “the sociological model of assimilation” toward “the concept of cultural pluralism.” It did, but Herskovits continued to see the acknowledgment of cultural difference as the most direct route to national assimilation and, ever Boas's student, could not shake the discipline's muted biological rubric for sorting cultural forms; Stewart, *New Negro*, 471, 472.
45. Herskovits, *Myth of the Negro Past*, 32.

46. M. F. Ashley Montagu, *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race* (New York, 1942), 5, 7, 8.
47. Benedict and Weltfish, *Races of Mankind*, 7.
48. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 94.
49. See Christopher P. Lehman, *The Colored Cartoon: Black Representation in American Animated Short Films, 1907–1954* (Amherst, 2007), 105.
50. Ruth Benedict and Gene Weltfish, *In Henry's Backyard: The Races of Mankind* (New York, 1948), 14, 19. See also *Brotherhood of Man*, United Productions of America, 1947.
51. UNESCO, "The Race Question" (Paris, 1950), 1.
52. *Ibid.*, 8.
53. *Ibid.*, 4.
54. John Hope Franklin, *Mirror to America: The Autobiography of John Hope Franklin* (New York, 2005), 103.
55. *Ibid.*, 104.
56. "For Manhood in National Defense," *Crisis*, December 1940, 375.
57. "Still Cannon Fodder," *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 20, 1940.
58. A. Philip Randolph, "Let's March on Capital 10,000 Strong, Urges Leader of Porters," in *For Jobs and Freedom: Selected Speeches and Writings of A. Philip Randolph*, ed. Andrew E. Kersten and David Lucander (Amherst, 2014), 203.
59. See A. Philip Randolph, "Letter to Franklin D. Roosevelt," in *For Jobs and Freedom: Selected Speeches and Writings of A. Philip Randolph*, ed. Andrew E. Kersten and David Lucander (Amherst, 2014), 206–7.
60. "100,000 to March in Job Protest," *New York Amsterdam Star-News*, April 21, 1941.
61. James G. Thompson, "Should I Sacrifice to Live 'Half-American'?", letter to the editor, *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 31, 1942.
62. "'Double V' Campaign Material Now Available," advertisement, *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 4, 1942.
63. Frank E. Bolden, "We Want Full Participating Rights in War to Save Democracy," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 7, 1942.
64. For more on the Double V movement, see Kimberley L. Phillips, *War! What Is It Good For? Black Freedom Struggles and the U.S. Military from World War II to Iraq* (Chapel Hill, 2012), 20–63; and Rawn James Jr., *The Double V: How Wars, Protest, and Harry Truman Desegregated America's Military* (New York, 2013), 137–43.
65. Robin D. G. Kelley, "The Riddle of the Zoot: Malcolm Little and Black Cultural Politics during World War II," in *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York, 1994), 166, 172.
66. Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with Alex Haley (New York, 1965), 105.
67. Dizzy Gillespie, *To Be, or Not . . . to Bop*, with Al Fraser (Garden City, NY, 1979), 120.
68. "Send Fighters, Too," *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 4, 1942.
69. A. Philip Randolph, "March on Washington Movement Presents Program for the Negro," in *For Jobs and Freedom: Selected Speeches and Writings of A. Philip Randolph*, ed. Andrew E. Kersten and David Lucander (Amherst, 2014), 212, 213.
70. James Baldwin, "Notes of a Native Son," in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston, 1955), 102, 101, 100.
71. *Ibid.*, 90.
72. "N. Y. Editors Disagree over Issue of War," *Chicago Defender*, March 28, 1942.

73. Himes, "Now Is the Time!," 272.
74. Chester Himes, "Democracy Is for the Unafraid," *Common Ground*, Winter 1944, 54. See also Chester Himes, "Negro Martyrs Are Needed," *Crisis*, May 1944, 159, 174.
75. Mary L. Dudziak, *War Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences* (New York, 2012), 5, 8.
76. Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (Garden City, NY, 1945), 45, 46.
77. *Ibid.*, 138.
78. Franklin, *Mirror to America*, 105.
79. *Ibid.*, 106.
80. "Dixie Prefers Nazis to Negroes, Soldier Finds," *Chicago Defender*, January 27, 1945.
81. Henry A. Wallace, "The Price of Free World Victory," in *Democracy Reborn* (New York, 1944), 193.
82. Henry A. Wallace, "America Tomorrow," in *Democracy Reborn* (New York, 1944), 240.
83. Wendell L. Willkie, *One World* (New York, 1943), 1, 158.
84. *Ibid.*, 190.
85. *Ibid.*, 19.
86. Quoted in "Negro Rights," *Life*, April 24, 1944, 32.
87. Quoted in Myrdal, *American Dilemma*, ix.
88. F. P. Keppel, foreword to *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, by Gunnar Myrdal (New York, 1944), vi.
89. *Ibid.*, vii–viii.
90. Myrdal, *American Dilemma*, xix.
91. Walter A. Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal and America's Conscience: Social Engineering and Racial Liberalism, 1938–1987* (Chapel Hill, 1990), xvii.
92. Quoted in *ibid.*, 163.
93. Myrdal, *American Dilemma*, 997, xlvi.
94. Singh, *Black Is a Country*, 39.
95. Myrdal, *American Dilemma*, xlv, xlvi, xlviii.
96. *Ibid.*, 1021.
97. *Ibid.*, 115.
98. *Ibid.*, 928, 929.
99. See Jackson, *Gunnar Myrdal*, 241.
100. Ralph J. Bunche, "Nothing Is Impossible for the Negro," in *Ralph J. Bunche: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Charles P. Henry (Ann Arbor, 1995), 263, 264.
101. Ellison, "American Dilemma," 303, 304.
102. *Ibid.*, 316, 317.
103. Frances Gaither, "Democracy—The Negro's Hope," review of *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, by Gunnar Myrdal, *New York Times*, April 2, 1944; Robert S. Lynd, "Prison for American Genius," review of *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, by Gunnar Myrdal, *Saturday Review*, April 22, 1944, 5.
104. Quoted in Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison* (New York, 2007), 181; Lawrence Jackson, *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius* (New York, 2002), 303.
105. Quoted in Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison*, 182.
106. Ellison, "American Dilemma," 317.
107. Frederick Douglass, "The Color Question," July 5, 1875, Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, [www.loc.gov/item/mfd000413](http://www.loc.gov/item/mfd000413).

108. Ralph Ellison, introduction to *Shadow and Act* (New York, 1964), xx. For an account of Park's feminization of Black life as "part of a larger strategy to discipline nonwhite immigrants and migrants according to the properties of the abstract citizen-subject," including in their embodiment of gender and sexual differences, see Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis, 2004), 58.
109. Ellison, "American Dilemma," 310.
110. *Ibid.*, 311.
111. Quoted in Urban Lehner, "Ellison Doubts Social Findings; Claims They Veer from Reality," *Michigan Daily*, October 5, 1967.
112. Quoted in *ibid.*
113. See Kenneth W. Warren, *So Black and Blue: Ralph Ellison and the Occasion of Criticism* (Chicago, 2003), 29.
114. Kenneth W. Warren, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge, MA, 2011), 42, 18.
115. Warren has faced an avalanche of criticism for suggesting, as he reasserted in a 2013 "Reply to My Critics," that "the very idea of African American literature at present asserts the priority of fighting racial discrimination over other forms of racial inequality." The literature scholar Walter Benn Michaels argues along similar lines that "celebrating diversity" has served as the left's "way of accepting inequality." The political scientist Adolph Reed, the dean of leftist anti-racist thinkers, insists that the agenda of antiracism, far from radical, constitutes a "pursuit of racial parity within neoliberalism," a commitment to maintaining "racism's status as uniquely egregious among forms of injustice over the goal of challenging injustice itself." Liberals did, as Warren, Michaels, and Reed observe, define the terms of a dominant reformist antiracism, but that does not mean that antiracism has not taken and cannot take other forms. An anticapitalist left cannot dismiss antiracism because it is racism that introduces and sustains the human divisions—including but, thanks to racial liberals' uneven detachment of culture from biological difference, not limited to color-line divisions—through which capital accumulates, on which capitalism thrives; Kenneth W. Warren, "A Reply to My Critics," *PMLA* 128, no. 2 (2013): 406; Walter Benn Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality* (New York, 2006), 199; Adolph Reed Jr., "Antiracism: A Neoliberal Alternative to a Left," *Dialectical Anthropology* 42, no. 2 (2018): 110; Adolph Reed Jr., "The 'Color Line' Then and Now: *The Souls of Black Folk* and the Changing Context of Black American Politics," in *Renewing Black Intellectual History: The Ideological and Material Foundations of African American Thought*, ed. Adolph Reed Jr. and Kenneth W. Warren (Boulder, 2010), 276.